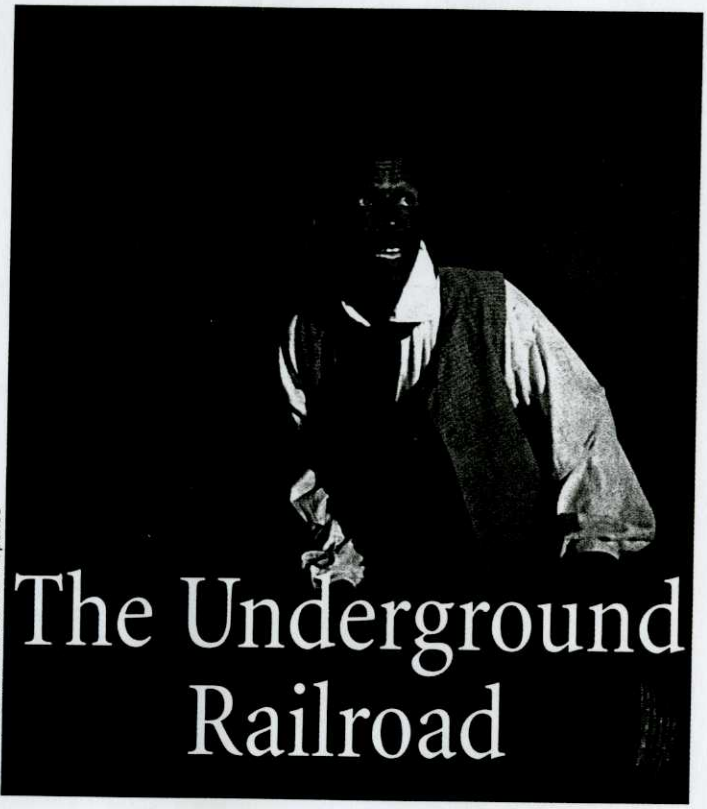
1999

# Theres a Movement Afoot, The Underground Railroad, American Visions, 1999

Ann Eskridge

# There's a Movement Afoot

## The Underground Railroad



Courtesy Conner Prairie/Shawn Spence

*by Ann E. Eskridge and Sharon Fitzgerald*

Standing upon a Kentucky plantation's field of tobacco stubble, Beverly Gray gazed across the shoreline at Ohio. She wondered how slaves who once tilled this ground had managed to endure the endless, backbreaking work, knowing that freedom was just across the river.

Gray's musings continued as she walked across the field and peered down a steep embankment into the murky Ohio River. In awe, she imagined fugitive slaves running by night through the woods, carefully climbing down the hillside, making their way to the river's edge. If they were fortunate, a boat awaited to ferry them across the water. Gray thought of the brave runaways who never made it to freedom, as well as of the many who did.

As an educator and a member of the Ohio Underground Railroad Association, Gray spends much of her free time investigating and documenting sites that may have significance in the Underground Railroad movement. She has been researching African-American history, and particularly the Underground Railroad, for the past 30 years.

"I live smack in the middle of an incredible history that's never been told," says Gray. Her research has taken her throughout Ohio, and sometimes, as with her trip to Kentucky, into the bordering South. "[I] wanted to see for myself what a slave saw on the banks looking across to freedom."

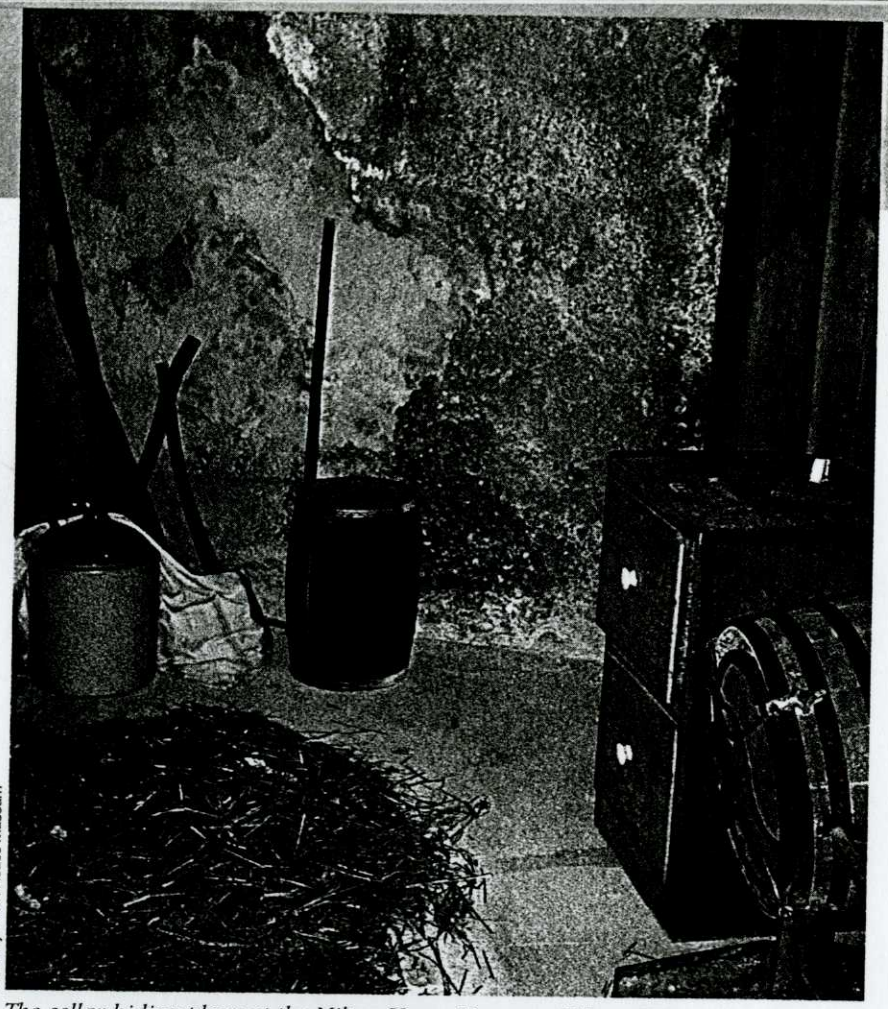
Gray's tendency to follow her instincts has been rewarded. On her way to the Ohio River, she spotted a plantation house, and something urged her to venture inside. The woman who owned the house graciously escorted her about. When they reached a particular bedroom, the owner mentioned, matter-of-factly, that it was from this room that "John Parker stole the baby."

To Gray, these words were chilling. A discovery like this one is not unusual for her, but each time, she is just as stunned by it. The story her hostess recounted was familiar to Ohio historians, but not as well-known by others.

At the narrative's center was John Parker, a fugitive slave who had escaped from Kentucky and settled in Ripley, Ohio. Once free, he became an inventor, industrialist and foundry owner. He was also an abolitionist and a conductor on the Underground Railroad.

One night, he was set to guide a husband and wife into the free state of Ohio but found them reluctant to escape. It seemed that their owner was keeping the couple's newborn child in his bedroom, knowing that the parents would not leave without their baby. As the story goes, Parker urged the man and woman to flee, promising to bring their baby to them.

"He crawled along the floor, went to the mistress' side of the bed and grabbed the baby," says Gray. "The master woke up and fired shots, but Parker and the baby were able to escape. He met the couple on the banks and spirited all of them to freedom in Ohio."



Courtesy Milton House Museum

*The cellar hiding place at the Milton House Museum, Milton, Wisc.*

By identifying the achievements of men like Parker, as well as the sites of Underground Railroad stations, groups like the Ohio Underground Railroad Association are attempting to shed a clearer, more truthful light upon American slavery and upon the movement that fought against it. In 1998, the diligence of such groups, coupled with the dedicated scholarship and advocacy of historians and preservationists, prompted the U.S. Congress to pass a bill to support programs devoted to the Underground Railroad.

The political process began in 1990, when the National Park Service (NPS) received a congressional mandate to study the Underground Railroad and suggest how it could best be recognized. A committee was formed to review the possibilities.

For five years, experts in the fields of African-American and U.S. history worked with specialists in historic preservation to discuss the identification and protection of Underground Railroad sites and the development of interpretive and commemorative programs. Another goal was the development of a procedural blueprint for the management of important sites, routes and structures.

From a preliminary list of 380 locations, 42 met the exacting criteria established for national historic landmarks. This standard includes not only a site's "nationally significant association, but also a high state of historic preservation, or historic integrity," according to NPS. These potential landmarks, located in 23 states and districts across the United States, included the birthplace of Harriet Tubman in Bucktown, Md.; John Brown's farm in Lake Placid, N.Y.; and the home of John Parker in Ripley.

*Many of the faculty members and financial supporters of Eleutherian College, in Lancaster, Ind., were active in the Underground Railroad.*

The committee submitted to Congress its detailed findings in 1995. Last year, the House of Representatives passed the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Act of 1998 (House Resolution 1635) by a 415-2 vote. A $500,000 annual budget has been designated for education and preservation efforts. On July 22 President Clinton signed the bill into law. Senate Bill 2070 assigned a $24-million five-year budget, special authorizations, and guidelines for the establishment of Underground Railroad cooperative educational and cultural programs.

"I think that the passage of the act provides national recognition to

## One Group's Journey

*by Ann E. Eskridge*

Cathy Nelson and five of her friends in Ohio had been involved in researching African-American history for a number of years. All of them educators, they sometimes gathered around a kitchen table to share with one another their latest research projects.

At one of these over-dinner conversations, the group began to discuss the amount of work that still needed to be done. "We knew that the more we researched, the more there was to research," Nelson says. "We knew there were many more stories to be told. We wanted to unearth those stories." The members of the group started considering the advantages of establishing their own organization.

And so in 1995, three years before the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Act of 1998 was passed, Nelson and her friends formed the Friends of Freedom Society. In 1996, the society held its first summit, which drew 90 people—many from Ohio and others from as far away as California. All of the attendees were people devoted to the research of African-American history—specifically, the Underground Railroad.

Nelson knew that for the organization to be effective, it had to develop a systematic way of uncovering and documenting data. To accomplish this she created a research arm, the Ohio Underground Railroad Association. She divided the state into regions and assigned a coordinator to each area. In addition to facilitating the work of researchers in their regions, these coordinators were expected to communicate with their counterparts in other counties.

"I was lucky," Nelson recalls. "These people were retired schoolteachers or local historians or archivists or genealogists. They knew how to approach research. They were foot soldiers who had been in the trenches for years."

The association's funds were limited, but the movement was well-fueled with the passionate, determined focus of about 100 volunteers. Members holding regular jobs pursued their research after hours or on weekends. Retirees made researching the Underground Railroad their avocation.

Their coordinated efforts have paid off. Although NPS has designated five sites significant to the Underground Railroad in Ohio, in less than two years the association found and documented 500 sites. And more are being discovered.

Nelson attributes the association's success to a couple of factors. The first is the detailed scholarship of Wilbur Siebert, the author of *The Underground Railway From Slavery to Freedom* (Macmillan, 1898). Siebert's insights continue to serve as a jumping-off point for students of the area.

The second factor is Ohio's complex geographical identity: a free state separated from the slave states Kentucky and Virginia by the Ohio River. "We've always had a large number of free black settlements dating back to the 1700s," says Nelson. "This made it attractive for fugitive blacks, because many of the free blacks, as well as the large Quaker population, were involved in anti-slavery activities."

Mostly, she gives credit to her network of volunteers. Nelson believes that people in other states, if organized properly, can uncover and document Underground Railroad stories of courage, kindness and cruelty. "Just from what we've done, it seems that the Underground Railroad was a much more extensive network and that there were countless people involved," she says. "And from what we can see, many of those people were blacks.

"This is different from what previously has been portrayed. We've always been shown as poor, helpless and passive. That's just not what we have found."—*A.E.E.*

a movement that has too long been ignored," says historian John Fleming, who in January assumed the position of director of the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center in Cincinnati. "It brings national attention to the whole struggle for freedom, not only among African Americans, but among all freedom-loving people."

The 1995 review committee's study suggested an approach that would foster understanding and encourage appreciation of the Underground Railroad's achievements. The congressional act upheld the same priorities. Emphasis has been placed on increased public awareness of the Underground Railroad; the need to identify, restore and preserve available sites; the enhancement of communication among groups involved in research; and the possibility of creating both a national landmark and a system of trails.

In other words, the challenge accepted by all concerned is the creation of a living museum—a modern-day tribute to a historic movement that was defined by its secrecy.

To Vincent deForest, special assistant to NPS Director Robert Stanton, neither the significance of this bill nor its potential results should be underestimated. "We don't allow the term 'project' to be used," says deForest. "We use the term 'initiative,' because this is much more of a mission and a spiritual movement than it is a project. That's very difficult for some people in government to understand. The ways in which we receive this information and what we do with it have much more to do with our appreciation of self and our survival than ... with just being history."

NPS is responsible for forging links among cultural organizations positioned to protect and interpret the Underground Railroad. The agency's initial approach has been to divide the United States into five regions and to assign each region a coordinator.

# Where the Tours Are

According to Marnyce McKell, a specialist in tourism development and ethnic consumer marketing, the Underground Railroad is likely to become one of the largest and most extensive heritage tours in the world. Fostering this development could result in increased opportunities for economic growth, particularly in rural areas.

**CANADA**
**Thorold, Ontario**
Region Niagara Tourist Council
(800) 263-2988
Niagara's Freedom Trail: An African-American African-Canadian Heritage Tour (self-driving tour)

**Windsor, Ontario**
Convention and Visitors Bureau of Windsor, Essex County and Pelee Island
(800) 265-3633
The Road That Led to Freedom (self-driving tour)

**CONNECTICUT**
**Farmington**
Farmington Historical Society
(800) 648-980
(860) 678-1645
Amistad and Underground Railroad Tour

**Heritage Trails**
(860) 677-8867
Amistad Sites and Freedom Trail Guided Bus Tour

**ILLINOIS**
**Alton**
Alton Illinois Convention and Visitors Bureau
(800) 258-6645
Underground Railroad tours

**INDIANA**
**Fishers**
Conner Prairie Museum
(317) 776-6000
90-minute interactive Underground Railroad experience

**MARYLAND**
**Baltimore**
African American Renaissance Tours
(410) 728-3837
(410) 727-0755
Underground Railroad tours

**MICHIGAN**
**Detroit**
Greater Detroit Black Tourism Network
(888) 756-6771
Historical tours include Underground Railroad history

**MISSOURI**
**Kansas City**
Passages Unlimited
(816) 483-4919
Underground Railroad customized walking and bus tours

**St. Louis**
Black World History Wax Museum
(314) 241-7057
Black Heritage Tour of St. Louis

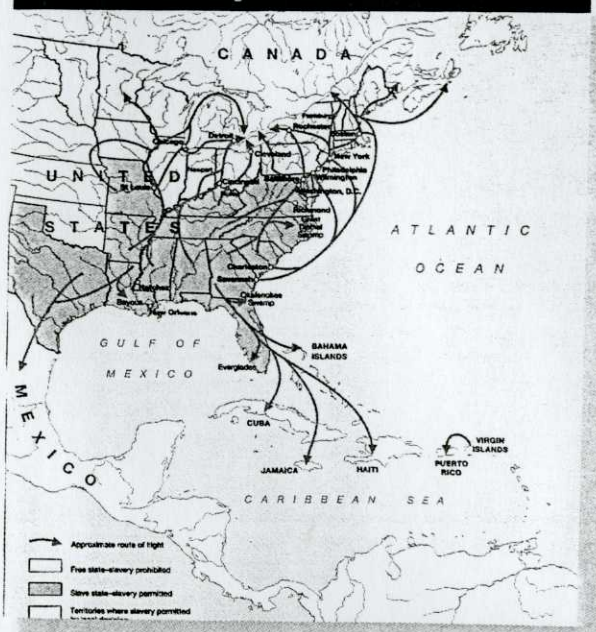
**NEW YORK**
**Niagara Falls**
Motherland Connextions Inc.
(716) 282-1028
Underground Railroad tours of the United States and Canada

**OHIO**
**Cincinnati**
Coleman Tours
(513) 242-3737
Freedom Tours of Northern Kentucky, four- and eight-hour walking and bus tours highlighting Underground Railroad sites

**TENNESSEE**
**Memphis**
Heritage Tours Inc.
(901) 527-3427
Historical sightseeing tours include Underground Railroad sites

**WASHINGTON, D.C.**
**Smithsonian Institution**
(202) 357-2700
The traveling exhibition "Creativity and Resistance: The Maroon Cultures of the Americas" focuses on the brave people who escaped from European mines and plantations throughout the Americas and established autonomous communities

Selected Routes of the Underground Railroad




"We're still trying to get organized and put people in touch with each other," says NPS Midwest Support Office Regional Coordinator Diane Miller. She has discovered that some states within her jurisdiction are limited in their organization, while others, including Ohio, are in the vanguard of Underground Railroad activity.

The regional coordinator of the NPS Philadelphia Support Office, Keith Everett, realizes that the process of setting up a viable network can be daunting. He is responsible for linking the activities of Underground Railroad organizations in 13 states, reaching as far north as Maine and as far west as West Virginia. "This is a huge, huge topic," Everett says. "I don't yet have a comprehensive picture of what's going on."

The potential outreach is indeed enormous. For decades, the search for crucial information regarding the Underground Railroad has benefited from both the intense scrutiny of scholars and the passionate commitment of history buffs. Historians, retired persons, professional and amateur genealogists, preservationists, and archivists have all pored over otherwise forgotten materials—church, census and tax records, old newspapers, county ledgers, faded letters and diaries found in the basements of homes and historical societies.

Researchers have hoped to find some clue, to verify a site or a story, to discover some link that will connect them to slavery's past.

In the introduction to his book *Guide to the Underground Railroad* (Hippocrene, 1994), historian Charles L. Blockson, who traced his great-grandfather's escape to Canada, warns of the frustrations that can accompany these revela-

tions: "Throughout my life in numerous towns, people have mentioned the homes, churches, caves and tunnels alleged to have been station stops on the Freedom Train. From the outset, I was faced with the heart-breaking task of exclusion when writing this book.

"Some of the most exciting homes connected with the Underground Railroad are restricted because of private ownership. Through urban renewal and other capital improvement projects, important landmarks, especially private homes, connected with the Underground Railroad have been demolished. Other buildings are falling into decay through neglect."

Individual involvement in Underground Railroad history extends to the acquisition of property. In the southeastern corner of Indiana, in a town called Lancaster in Jefferson County, two women—Dotti Reindollar and Jae Breitweiser—combined their resources in order to purchase what had once been Eleutherian College. The college grounds had been deserted since 1937, but at one time the institution educated people of all races and both genders. Many of the faculty members and financial supporters were active in the Underground Railroad.

"We wanted to tell the story of how this college fit into the pre–Civil War era," Reindollar explains. She and Breitweiser want to restore and preserve the setting and develop its interpretation.

Pearl Shelton returned to Hopedale, Ohio, just in time to stop the demolition of an Underground Railroad site. The home—built around 1826 and left to decay for years—contains a 15-foot tunnel that leads to a dry cistern. "This is where they used to hide the slaves," Shelton says. Having researched the house, Shelton invested in the property and then hired contractors to secure the crumbling structure. Her next step, the development of architectural plans, is on hold until she secures additional funding.

"You can't get grant money unless you have plans, and you can't develop plans for the site unless you have money," says Shelton. When the renovation of the building is complete, she would like for it to become an institution that will house African-American and Underground Railroad history.

Blockson hopes that the passage of the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Act and the subsequent involvement of the NPS will help empower widespread research efforts and generate public awareness and advocacy. Years of work in the field have taught him that the inability to protect landmark structures can result in the loss of the irreplaceable.

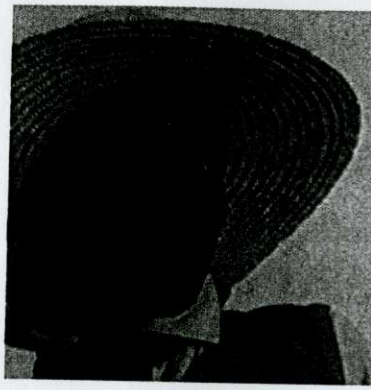
"The John Parker home in Ripley, Ohio, has been recently restored as a result of the National Park Service's Underground Railroad study," Blockson says. "Parker was one of the leading conductors in Ohio, and he was a very, very important black man. When I visited his home in 1982, it was almost coming down. One of the first things that we brought up at the advisory committee was the preservation of that home.

"On the other hand, when we placed 65 African-American state markers in Philadelphia, back in 1994, less than a month before we placed the marker to honor William Still at his house on 12th Street, they tore the house down. Nevertheless, we placed a marker at the site.

"And these are only the ones that we know of. There are others. There is a church up in Wilkes-Barre, Pa., the first church that Paul Robeson's father pastored, that was a stop on the Underground Railroad. They are thinking of getting rid of it. The church of Rev. Peter Spencer in Delaware was torn down several years ago; they just have a marker now.

"But William Still's house," Blockson continues, his voice beginning to trail off, "everybody knew him. And one month before we had the marker in place, they tore down that one house to build a garage-type thing.

"So you see the parallels. You have two black men, both of them extremely important to the Underground Railroad: John Parker, the great conductor in Ohio, and William Still, the great conductor and agent in Philadelphia. One home was destroyed and the other was not. That is why this bill is very important."



"But William Still's house ... everybody knew him. And one month before we had the marker in place, they tore down that one house to build a garage-type thing."

Courtesy Conner Prairie/Shawn Spence

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